

# CITY OF SAN JOSE - MEMORANDUM

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TO: Historic Landmarks  
Commission

FROM: Richard Buikema  
Historic Preservation Officer

SUBJECT: **CENTURY 21 THEATRE**  
**CITY LANDMARK NOMINATION**

December 18, 2013

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On November 25, 2013, the Historic Landmarks Commission requested to place the City Landmark nomination of the Century 21 theatre and/or the larger site that includes the former Bob's Big Boy restaurant on the January 9, 2014 Historic Landmarks Commission agenda. The nomination of the Landmark begins the landmark designation process. If nominated by the Commission, application materials including information prepared by a qualified historian would need to be submitted to the City to document its historic value. Upon receipt and evaluation of the information, public hearings will be scheduled according to the Municipal Code for the Commission's recommendation and City Council action on the proposed designation.

A City Landmark is considered to have a special historical, architectural, cultural, aesthetic or engineering interest or value of an historical nature. The nomination of a City Landmark is in accordance with the City's Municipal Code that allows for the nomination of landmarks by the City Council, Historic Landmarks Commission or a private property owner.

The Century 21 theatre was constructed in 1964 and is considered an example of mid-Century modern architecture. It was the first of six similarly designed theatres that were constructed in San Jose during the period of 1964 to 1971. For additional information, please refer to the attached report on the Century 21 movie theatre and the former Bob's Big Boy restaurant.



Richard Buikema  
Historic Preservation Officer

Attachments

## San Jose's Century 21 Theatre

### Northern California's Cinerama Dome



Historic Photograph, History San Jose

#### Presenters

Heather David – Cultural Historian and author of *Mid-Century by the Bay*

Therese Poletti – Journalist, author of *Art Deco San Francisco: The Architecture of Timothy Pflueger*.  
Art Deco Society of California preservation committee member, Docomomo Noca board member, Tour Coordinator and Guide, San Francisco City Guides

Sally Zarnowitz – Architect, Architectural Critic, and former Historic Preservation Officer for the City of San Jose

#### Name of Property

Historic Name: Century 21 Theatre

Other Names: Winchester Theater 21

#### Location

Street & Number: 3161 Olsen Drive

City or town: San Jose

State: California

**Architectural Classification:** MODERN



## Summary

San Jose's domed Century 21 Theatre opened on November 24, 1964. The theatre is a rare example of extant mid-century suburban roadside architecture in San Jose with its attention-catching, spaceship-like dome and large neon sign.

The theater was designed by Bay Area architect Vincent G. Raney, in the post-World War II era of optimism and confidence in the future. The space age had officially begun. Three years earlier, President John F. Kennedy told congress in a special address that the United States would have a man on the moon and safely back to earth by the end of the decade. The post-Sputnik space race with Russia was a theme at the two world's fairs in the U.S. during the early 1960s, both the Seattle World's Fair in 1962 and the New York World's Fair in 1964-1965. Space age dome-shaped pavilions were especially popular at the New York fair, and the iconic Seattle Space Needle retains its saucer-like rotating restaurant to this day.

The design of the Century 21 Theatre in San Jose mirrors the utilitarian geodesic dome initially created and patented by industrial designer and architect Buckminster Fuller. These domed buildings, which provided maximum space at a minimum of cost, were the perfect setting to display a new cinema technology called Cinerama. This wide-screen Cinerama, a pre-cursor to today's IMAX, was originally shown on a long, curved screen and was a showcase for spectacular productions and travel pictures, where viewers felt like they were inside the movie.

Hollywood producer Mike Todd, who was involved in the creation of Cinerama technology, formed a company Todd A.O. to improve upon the early three camera version of Cinerama technology. In early 1958, Todd hired architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design a geodesic domed theater, one that improved upon Fuller's design, using aluminum from Henry Kaiser for the dome. The idea was to create and franchise theaters that would show films produced using Todd's single-lens version of Cinerama. But after Todd's tragic death in a plane crash in 1958, those plans were shuttled. But the idea of a domed theater for Cinerama persisted, and in November, 1963, Cinerama Inc., the company that created Cinerama, opened a theatre in Hollywood, the first of its kind, to show Cinerama films, with a design similar to the model shown by Wright and Todd in 1958, using the single screen process.

One year later, a domed Cinerama theatre opened in San Jose, operated by Century Theaters, a company founded by movie theater entrepreneur Ray Syufy. Today, Century 21 is one of the last Cinerama theaters still in existence. The Hollywood Cinerama theatre, which was restored to also show movies in the original three-strip process, is one of three operating theatres around the world today which shows movies in Cinerama. Microsoft Corp. co-founder Paul Allen is the owner/savior of the Seattle Cinerama Theatre, which also shows movies in the three strip version of Cinerama, as well as in 35 and 70 mm.

The Century 21 in San Jose was the first theater to be constructed in the Century theater chain and it was the only Cinerama-purposed Century dome. With a wraparound projection booth and larger lobby footprint, there is no other Century dome like San Jose's Century 21.

**With the exception of a lobby, restroom and concession area renovation in 1997, the auditorium and floor plan of the theater appears much as it did in 1964 and retains its architectural integrity, with new seats and carpeting. The layout of the lobby was not altered. The exterior of the domed roof was re-shingled, probably in 1997, but the building also retains its original massing and integrity of setting. It**

also retains its original projection room design, with three windows for three projectors, and could be easily retrofitted to show original Cinerama films, in addition to its regular programming.

The Century 21 Theatre is one of the best remaining examples of mid-century modern architecture in the South Bay and it fits the definition of modernism as put forth in San Jose's Historic Modern Context Statement (2009).

The Century 21 Theatre has been part of the Bay Area's cultural fabric for nearly five decades and the building is widely loved, with over 3,500 locals signing a petition on [change.org](http://change.org) to preserve the Winchester Domes.

#### **Excerpt from National Register Nomination**

##### ***National Register Criterion C***

The Century 21 Theater in San José is eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion C (Design/Construction), at the local level, as a property that embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type (suburban dome theater) and period (1960s). The period of significance is 1964, the building's original date of construction.

The building is eligible as a distinctive and increasingly rare building type, as well as a symbol of its era and its place – mid-century San José – an emerging hub of aerospace and high technology, where innovative "Space Age" architecture was appreciated.

Unlike many other dome theaters built to show Cinerama, the Century 21 Theater was never subdivided into smaller auditoriums; indeed, it remains one of the largest theater interiors in Northern California.

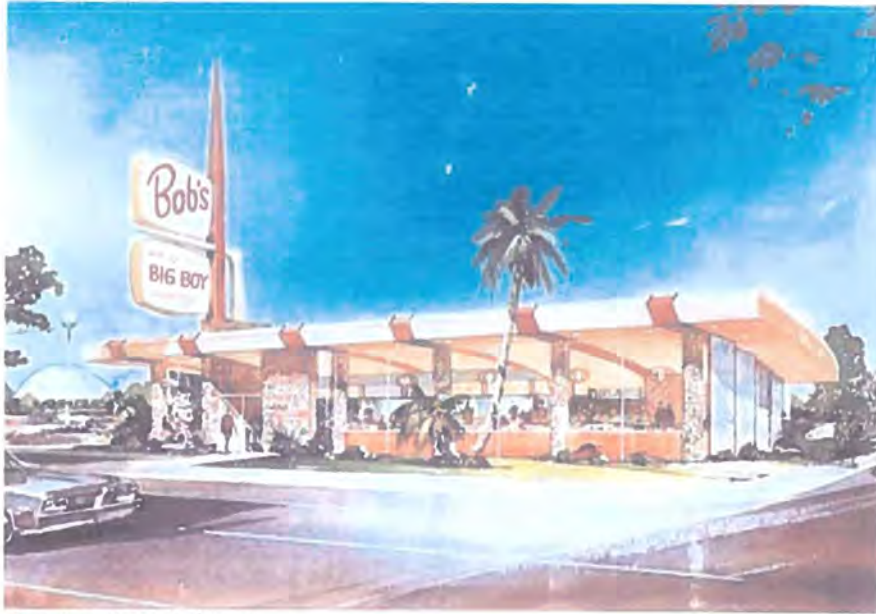
As a freestanding suburban theater, the Century 21 Theater also represents the evolution from the downtown movie palaces of the pre-World War II period and the "shopping center" and multiplex theaters of the 1970s and 1980s.

Because of its prominent location, the Century 21 Theater remains one of the more notable surviving examples of mid-century commercial architecture in San José. Its bold finial-capped dome, looking like a flying saucer about to take off, remains easily visible from Interstate 280. Its Space Age design was clearly intended to catch the eye of motorists traveling at a high rate of speed through the ever-changing suburban landscape of the post-World War II Santa Clara Valley.





For Future Consideration



Courtesy ADN Architects

### **1958 Armet & Davis Prototype for Bob's Big Boy Restaurant Chain**

Address: 449 South Winchester Boulevard, San Jose, California

Current use: Restaurant (Flames Coffee Shop)

This building is a well preserved, and exceedingly rare, example of the prototype that Armet & Davis created for Bob Wian in 1958.

To date, the only other documented examples exist in Anaheim, California and Las Vegas, Nevada and both of the aforementioned structures have been significantly remodeled.

Architectural Style: MODERN

Subset: Googie or Coffee Shop Modern

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## Please Landmark Century 21!

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, the San Jose Historic Landmarks Commission heard a presentation on the history and significance of the Century 21 Theater at 3161 Olsen Drive and Winchester Boulevard. The presentation was given by DOCOMOMO (Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement) representatives, author Heather David and journalist/author Therese Poletti. Sally Zarnowitz, former San Jose Historic Preservation Officer, also presented.

The purpose of the presentation was to encourage a nomination for City Landmark designation of Century 21. Century 21, Syufy's first dome theater, is adjacent to two other early dome theaters, Century 22 and Century 23. The land occupied by these three theaters is threatened with development. The historic community fears all trace of these icons from the 1960s will be demolished. Razing is already planned for Century 24 and Century 25. They were built later and are not as historically



significant. Century Almaden was built in the early 1970s and has been occupied by a church since 1996.

Movie houses in San Jose progressed from early vaudeville/movie combinations to downtown theaters, drive-ins, neighborhood theaters and then in the early 1960s, large theaters near or in suburban shopping centers. By the 1970s, theaters grew into multiplexes and eventually megaplexes in the 1990s. Century 21, an early example of the suburban theater, will be 50 years old next year. Opening day was in November, 1964, and the expansive, futuristic dome theater was quite the unique experience at that time.

(Cont'd on page 3)



# Executive Director's Message

Year-end reviews are always popular as we come to the end of another year. I have tried to keep you up-to-date throughout the year with my columns in *Continuity* and via our website and our Facebook page, so I won't dwell much on the past 12 months.



*Brian Grayson in front of First Church on St. James St.*

*Photo: Silicon Valley Community Newspapers*

The end of the year is also a good time to look forward and get a glimpse of what 2014 holds for us. We will continue our efforts to save at least one of the Century theaters.

As you probably know, all of the domed theaters are being threatened with demolition as the City looks to redevelop those sites. We believe that Century 21, as it nears its 50th anniversary, is worthy of being saved and will work towards a successful resolution that saves the building and also allows development to move forward.

At our request, the Historic Landmarks Commission has begun discussions that we hope will lead to nominating Century 21 for landmark designation. The discussion will continue when the Commission next meets in January. Our ongoing efforts will include educating our decision makers on issues of importance as they relate to historic preservation. Other cities showcase their historic assets with pride—we believe San Jose should also be one of those cities but officials are slow to grasp the value of their historic inventory.

The City is also slow to actually conduct the important historic structures surveys that are vital to the protection of our historic resources. We will renew our efforts to have the city finally conduct these critical surveys so we have a complete picture of what buildings need to be saved.

We do continue to make inroads by working with the City's Planning Department and developers. Some

developers are more open to saving historic resources than others but we are establishing relationships that we hope will prove beneficial to all parties.

In addition to our work saving historic structures, we will also present a number of fun and educational programs next year. Perhaps the largest undertaking of the year will be another historic homes tour along the lines of our very successful 2012 tour.

We are also discussing presenting other interesting programs including walking tours and lectures. We look forward to your support of these events.

Hopefully, we will host another Movie Night showcasing vintage films of Santa Clara Valley. Many of you attended our recent Movie Night and enjoyed the films, foods, and fun of that evening. Many thanks to our friends from the Santa Clara County Pioneers—Joe Melehan, Jim Zetterquist, and Bill Foley—for their dedication and to the San Jose Woman's Club for making this evening such a success. Thanks also to event co-chairs Sharon McCauley and Patt Curia and their hardworking committee.

Of course, it takes people to make all of this happen. As you know, we are always looking for volunteers to help—so keep us in mind if you would like to help plan and participate in next year's events. Let us know if you'd like to help out: [info@preservation.org](mailto:info@preservation.org) or call the office at 408.998.8105.

We'll also be electing our Board members at our Annual Meeting on February 10. Watch for your e-ballot and please vote. Simple instructions and details will be included with your e-ballot.

And finally, membership renewals have been mailed out to those whose memberships expire during this quarter. Our members are very important to us so please renew your membership as soon as possible. Please make a donation to PAC\*SJ when you are considering your year-end gifts.

Thanks to all of our supporters and best wishes for a happy and healthy holiday season.

**-Brian Grayson, Executive Director  
Preservation Action Council of San Jose**



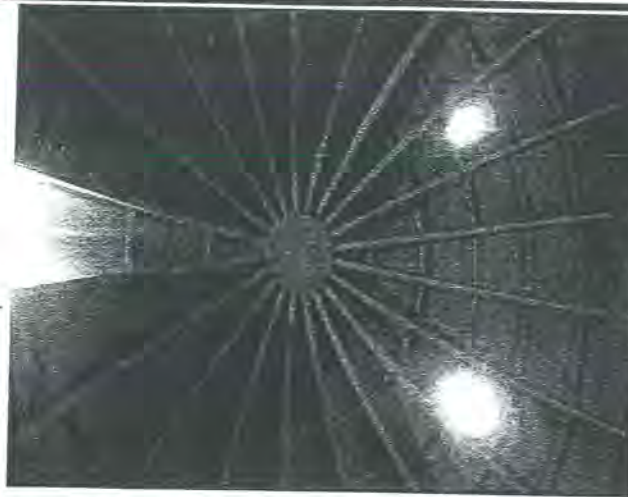
## Century 21 (Cont'd)

The founder of the Syufy Theatre Chain, Raymond J. Syufy (1919-1995), grew up in Berkeley and worked in a theater to pay for college and law school. He then ran his own theater, the Rita in Vallejo, at age 23. Ultimately, Syufy Enterprises, Inc. was considered one of the largest and most profitable theater chains in the U.S.

Syufy, as an attorney, was key to breaking the Hollywood film studios' monopoly of showing their first-run movies only in their own chain of theaters. By orders of the Supreme Court in 1949-1950, the studios were required to separate production and distribution from their movie houses. Independent exhibitors were now able to offer first-run films as soon as they came out.

Syufy expanded his theaters in California and eventually to other western states. By the early 1970s, Syufy Enterprises owned 267 screens, including drive-ins. By 1995, when Raymond Syufy passed away, the company owned 476 screens. Syufy Enterprises then became Century Theaters, Inc. and expected even greater expansion. In 2006 the chain was sold to Cinemark Inc. except for Century 21, 22 and 23. These first three San Jose dome theaters reverted back to the original company, Syufy Enterprises, Inc.

Vincent Raney (1905-2001) was the architect for all of Syufy's theaters. He was based in San Francisco and designed hundreds of gas stations as well as over 100 movie theaters, shopping centers, commercial buildings, schools and churches. Raymond Syufy first hired Raney to design a unique dome theater near the Valley Fair Shopping Mall and eventually all his theaters until the early 1990s. Raney most likely was influenced by the Hollywood Cinerama Dome Theater that had just opened in 1963. This designated Los Angeles Historic Monument is a geodesic dome design probably inspired from the earlier architectural sensations of R. Buckminster Fuller who brought the geodesic dome into popularity.



*Inside Century 21, the huge dome is supported with 20 long, curved beams.*

The dome theater was unique to Santa Clara Valley in the early 1960s and symbolized the futuristic space age. Syufy theaters became known for interesting architecture, especially the domed "igloo" design. As more theaters were built throughout the Western U.S., Syufy theaters became notable for these popular, modern-style structures.

Century 21 was not a geodesic dome, but a smooth dome built with concrete blocks and a steel frame. Twenty ribs support the

dome and meet at the top where a pronounced, orange, space-age antennae sits on the exterior. Century 21 was advertised as showing the first "new wide-screen epics" with the Cinerama system of three synchronized cameras projecting on a huge, curved screen. By the time it opened, the single 70 mm format was developed and preferred over the three-projector system. Its superior sound, projection and clarity of image and color surpassed other theaters of the day.

Century 21 served as the model for the rest of Raney's dome theaters although the lobby was much larger—embellished with bubble lights and gold accents, the exterior was

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## Century 21 (Cont'd)

constructed with decorative concrete block walls and the concrete projection room was curved. The single screen structure seated about 950 patrons. The interior walls were false plaster and fabric.

Today it has an expansive feel since it's one of the few theaters that is not divided into smaller movie houses. It is a prime candidate for landmark status because of its unique design, its integrity and the fact that it was the first of its kind. Both Negative Declaration reports for Century 24 and 25 state numerous times that the Winchester/Olin Drive dome theaters are the historically significant and best examples of the early suburban theater development in San Jose. 



*The 1964 Century 21 is the first dome theater built by Syufy Enterprises, Inc. It is architecturally intact and serves as an excellent example of mid-century modern architecture.*

Sources: 1) HLC presentation. 2) Final Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration, Westgate Theater Redevelopment (Century 25), October 2013. 3) Final Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration, 741 S. Winchester Blvd. Project (Century 24), October 2013.

(Photos & text: Gayle Frank)